

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word Education under attack

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When George W. Bush became President, he announced that education would be his highest domestic priority. Obviously that changed with 9/11, but his “No Child Left Behind” program was passed with great fanfare. Today that program stands revealed as a drastically underfunded project that fails to solve the problems it was supposed to change, while creating many new ones.

The Right’s attack on education is broad and multi-faceted. Bush’s words and actions mark the terrain. At its broadest and deepest level, the Republican administration and Congress have led a steady attack on science and scientific thinking. Bush weighed in on the creationist vs. evolution issue by saying that “intelligent design” should be taught as a plausible counter-position to evolutionary science. Of course, he means in high schools in Kansas and Pennsylvania; no one expects that intelligent design will enter the science curriculum at the President’s alma maters, Yale and Harvard. Similar foolishness was offered by Senator Bill Frist (R-TN), an M.D. and famous heart surgeon. On the Senate floor he claimed that Terri Schiavo’s doctors were wrong in saying she was in a persistent vegetative state. His basis was looking at family video footage of the comatose woman, presumably on the parents’ (terrisfight.org) Internet site. One doubts if he would accept a medical diagnosis of his family members made in a similar way. Earlier, on a TV interview show, he repeatedly dodged the question of whether HIV-AIDS could be transmitted through sweat or tears as some conservatives have claimed, contradicting mainstream medical science.

Foolish public statements are not the crucial issue. Rather, they are simply the surface mark of a deep disdain for science and rational analysis. The administration has used its executive power and control of Congress to reject received scientific knowledge and to try to find any possible alternative to bolster conservative policy changes. Most notoriously, the lead example has been the attempt to deny that global warming exists or in any way poses a danger that must be addressed. Government scientists have been muzzled or removed. We see a concerted roll back of industrial and environmental regulations, and an effort to remove scientists on regulatory and review panels who are not amenable to corporate agendas.

The Presidential disconnect between receiving information and action that was so visible in *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s depiction of Bush's inability to respond to the World Trade Center attack was repeated by days, not minutes, of stasis in the face of Hurricane Katrina. Another disconnect appeared when the President spoke at Kansas State University in January in a rare talk to an audience not carefully selected and ideologically groomed. When a student asked about the pending legislation to cut \$12.7 billion in student loan programs, Bush pretended not to hear the question, and then claimed ignorance of the matter. Rep Ron Wyden (D-OR) pointed out afterwards that the amount cut from student loans was precisely the same amount needed to make permanent the tax cuts for the super-rich that Bush had earlier promoted.

When Bush claims to support education, a second look reveals his sleight of hand. In the 2006 State of the Union address, he promised \$5.9 billion to math and science education and research budgets at federal laboratories. But it turns out that two-thirds of that money — \$4.6 billion — consists of tax credits to corporations for investing in research and development.

During the Reagan era, cultural conservatives pushed an academic agenda of fighting for tradition, the classics, the canon. They opposed the intrusion of media and cultural studies, along with considerations of race, class and gender in the arts: all of which represented to them a deterioration of standards. The first decade of the 21st century presents a clown show devolution of conservative "values." In his congressional hearings for appointment to the Supreme Court, Samuel Alito claimed he couldn't remember anything about his membership in a Princeton alumni

group actively opposed to the admission of women and minorities, even though he prominently and proudly presented this fact in a job application to the Reagan administration. Even more conveniently, he seems to have forgotten that a few generations earlier, he would have been at best framed within a quota system and perhaps disqualified, despite his merits, from Princeton's admission for being a Catholic and Italian-American.

While neo-conservatives proclaim the market the answer for everything, and the supreme arbiter of justice, there is one market they seem to have trouble with: the marketplace of ideas. Thus one current conservative cause has been to call for an “academic bill of rights,” demand compensatory hiring of politically conservative faculty members, and enlist students to record and complain about professorial bias. Red diaper baby turned neocon David Horowitz has been promoting this project by “proving” that faculty must be biased because they often register as Democratic Party voters in primary elections. In line with rabid Right talk show hosts like Rush Limbaugh, unacceptable radicals are no longer just Communists, Socialists, New Leftists, Black Power militants, and any and all feminists, but now the 50% of the voting population who supported Kerry over Bush.

Horowitz brings forth horror stories of discrimination against conservative students and of professors forcing far-left politics down student throats. Yet actual investigation has shown some stories are bogus. When he was questioned during a Pennsylvania legislature committee hearing on his “academic bill of rights,” Horowitz finally had to admit that stories he presented as factual were just hearsay and he hadn’t actually investigated them. His organization’s website allows anonymous posting of student complaints of bias and he points to it as evidence of his claims. But a visit to that site also discovers that many of these complaints are clearly made up by pranksters and actually mock conservatives and their politics. (Like research, irony doesn’t seem to be one of Horowitz’s strong points.)

If the “academic bill of rights” seems to address a mirage problem, other conservative academics, amplified by Fox News mouths, have tried to convince the public that the academy is so skewed to the left that the only viable solution is to mandate hiring conservatives to achieve parity. While opposing “affirmative action” to overcome racial/ethnic and gender biased practices and results, these

folks feel no compulsion about using quotas to achieve political “balance” on the faculty.

Horowitz and others also call for an inspection of course curricula: readings assigned, lecture topics, assignments, and exams. One of Horowitz’s former staff set up a website which calls for students at UCLA to tape record lectures and duplicate all course materials of suspicious professors, with a bounty of \$100 for a complete set of materials.

At a more intellectually profound level, one could ask what exactly the Right wants in terms of “fairness” and “balance” and “equity” in media analysis. And why they don’t have it. Certainly one reason would seem to be that there are very few media professors who are producing scholarship that undermines the historical and aesthetic position of Eisenstein, Vertov, Pudovkin, and other directors and theorists of the Soviet 1920s. And figures such as Renoir and Bazin were certainly too far left to please neocons. And don’t even think about those postwar Italians, the French New Wave, or Cuban cinema. What would a film history course suitable to a Right agenda look like? You’d be hard pressed to find any documentary filmmakers except for Leni Reifenstahl you could teach.

What the Right can’t seem to deal with is that perhaps the field itself is a left-friendly place. Maybe the history of cinematic art really is a history of progressive thought and expression for the most part. While we might view John Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln* as a solidly conservative statement of values (to follow a famous analysis by *Cahiers du cinéma*), we’d still have to question Ford’s credentials given *The Grapes of Wrath*, which seems to be biased toward the downtrodden and skeptical of the capitalist system, not to mention *Cheyenne Autumn* as being way too sympathetic to the plight of Native Americans and critical of the U.S. government and military. Too bad we can’t call in the Bureau of Indian Affairs Officials for Truth, or the Plains Cavalry Veterans for Truth to give the politically correct (Right) line.